

The Petal of the Rose that was that Stung in Cairo

"*Ya'ani*, how may I serve you today?" asks Abdul, the coffeehouse merchant in the small alley café behind the Conrad on the east bank of the *Riv Nil*, almost a whisper. "Turkish, *maz boot, afwan*," says I. I am determined to practice my Arabic, wondering how to translate, "A woman seeks one man for everything, a man seeks every woman for one thing." Abdul brings the coffee with a biscuit. "*Shukran*," I say, "*Afwan*, my brother," he responds.

"I say, my brother," my nanna wants me to," after feeling my eyelids covered with *sheesha* ash, "to bring her a *sheesha*. May I buy your oldest water pipe, brother?"

Abdul is startled. "Brother, this is a service shop, not a gift shop. You should go to a new shop that sells *sheeshas*. All of mine are in daily use for years. They are old and shabby. Your nanna might even say 'nasty.'"

"My brother," I say, my nanna is an old woman, so she shall have an old pipe. Besides, it's only for décor."

“Still, you should buy your nanna a new a new *sheesha* with clear glass bulbs and shinny metal trays, *ya’ani*, and new leathers, cloth weavings, and new bit, as respect alone,” Abdul retorts softly.

“Brother, if I buy a new pipe, I should have a new nanna. Does *Allah* want me to abandon my old nana, Abdul?”

Abdul laughs and says, “*Ya’ani*, my brother, I can let you have my oldest and nastiest *sheesha* for your old nanna, at great disadvantage to myself.”

“Abdul, that is very generous of you,” I whisper in return so he draws nearer. “And how much money would you ask of a brother for your oldest and nastiest pipe, my bother?”

Abdul retorts, “I have these *sheeshas* for many years, even before my sons were born. They are family to me now. But for you, my brother, I will let you have a nice *sheesha* for only 10,000 Egyptian Pounds, if you promise not to tell my wife, Nabila. I will tell her the pipe was stolen, or better, it broke beyond simple repair.”

A turbaned, brown-tooth man turns to me and says, “*Effendi* from across the sea, I will give you a fine *sheesha* for half that price.”

“My esteemed brother, my nanna allows me to buy used but not stolen goods.”

“You disrespect me, my foreign brother. Why would you think my *sheesha* would be stolen?”

“Because you will sell me yours from your wife’s home and tell your wife it was stolen by a foreigner. So it would be stolen.”

The man translates to Arabic and the other men, mostly turbaned as well, laugh loudly, some coughing as well.

Laughing, I turn to Abdul. I say, “For 10,000 pounds, I could buy your shop, a young blond-haired, blue-eyed wife from Fayoum, and several new *sheeshas* even made-to-order, my brother.”

“Oh, *ya’ani*, you cut my heart. I couldn’t let it go for, and do not tell Nabila, for less than 7,500 LE. Just between you and me, you understand, as you are my brother.”

“Abdul, that is most generous of you. It would give my nanna much joy to have your nice *sheesha* in her modest home. It will delight her

friends and she would be praiseful of you and your family. But still, I don't have 7,500 LE with me. How about taking, say 100 LE and lend me the difference, as we are brothers, Abdul?"

Now Abdul laughs loudly as he refreshes my gritty dark brown coffee and replaces the empty plate with a fresh tantalizing pastry that appears to have fallen from the back of a donkey cart. We continue to banter back and forth, finally settling. I give Abdul five 100 LE notes as he puts a disassembled, much worn *sheesha* in a reused sugar sack for nanna. I am happy to leave his outdoor shop as I began to feel ash in my eyes after breathing the hash fumes from the pipes, sucked on by half-a-dozen men dressed in drab kaftans and neat turbans.

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In the *fundouk* Semiramis, my 18<sup>th</sup> floor suite next to the Syrian ambassador seems searched daily. My floppies are disordered, and when I turn on my laptop, the age comes up in Arabic. At the elevator tower overlooking the *Riv Nil*, admiring the polished pink marble flooring, I stand waiting for the elevator. A young woman approaches, dressed in loose-fitting silk European dress and bright gold jewelry on her thin wrist and around her strong neck. She is an attractive French girl from Oman, talking to herself in French, complaining

rather loudly about Egyptian rudeness, laziness, and food, saying how boring she is in Cairo.

*"Pardonez moi, mademoiselle, how are you today? It sure is a lovely day to be alive,"* I offer.

She says, *"Non, non, non, it's madame, you fool. I never get receive any respect in Cairo. I just hate it here. But my husband sent me away for the summer with the girls and their slaves, keeping the precious boys with him in Oman, of course. Non, non, never anything to do, terrible shopping, stupid shop keepers haggling over everything, so rude pretending kindness..."*

*"Madame,"* I say, thinking, "A lady who says 'no' means 'maybe.' A lady who says 'maybe' means 'yes.' And a lady who says 'yes' is no lady."

*"I love Cairo, my favorite city. How may I help you, madame?"*

She darts back, her white polished teeth nearly barking in a tight jaw, in tears, "He does this to me every summer. Sends me off to Cairo with the girls, then to Alex, it's so boring."

"I am so sorry, *madame*. What, if I may ask, do you like to do? I love the zoo, the pyramids of Giza, the Egyptian Museum, the Pharonic vil..."

"It is without use, *non, non, non*, I must shop or I die, you idiot. Can't you see, I am a woman, a fashionable French in this polluted stupid city full of stupid, disrespectful people," she says, nearly shouting at me as she disappears into an open elevator box. She hits the buttons several times and looks at me in anticipation of my entrance. I dare not join this madwoman, respectfully standing back in the tower overlooking the eternal Nile, watching the doors close, gratefully silent.

I am thinking of what an Afghan woman told her American teacher who asked her why she was late for school, "A traveler on a horse does not understand a traveler on foot."

Thirty minutes later, I am at Felfelah for *shwarma*, ordering several, watching adolescent boys breaking windshield wipers of cars parked along the street in front of the restaurant. I draw this to the attention of the meat carver, "*Ya'ani*," he says, "everyone must pay the boys to park. Those who don't pay, the boys punish their cars."

I take my beef *shwarmas* upstairs to hear Madonna from multiple TV screens, watching her do a sexy striptease of sorts, panties and bras being pulled off of her yet magically not revealing any interesting anatomy. The small clean eating hall with its multiple screens is packed with modestly dressed Moslem teenagers, revealing eyes, noses, and little else. They are cheering Madonna onward, giggling, pointing, covering the cloths over their mouths in modesty with dainty teenage Egyptian hands, which have rarely if ever touched a non-related male.

At three or more times their ages, I am amused. They are not at all embarrassed by my presence. As the small hall fills up even further with young giggling girls, I am gently lifted from my stool, starting across the great turnabout circle in Cairo's early evening traffic as I walk slowly back to the *fundouk*.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> floor, two very young girls are running back and forth the carpeted hallway as I exit the empty elevator box in the tower.

Perhaps an 8-year old catching up with an older 11- or 12- year old, both in very fashionable Western dress, speaking French excitedly, finally arriving at the ornate door across from mine, where the young French complainer opens her door to let them in. I glance and smile at her, noticing an older and a younger woman dressed in black

*galabeyas* revealing nothing, but pale said faces in the back of their suite. The French lady frowns at me and shouts at the girls, probably in reprimand, *en francais*.

Once in my suite, noticing again that someone(s) have entered my laptop, I am saddened but hopeful, realizing that I have several barely warm Felfelah *shwarmas* in a stark white plastic bag with bright orange Arabic script. I wipe the Cairo street dust from my hands and face with a warm washcloth, straightening my clothes to align the front crease of my shirt with my money-belt buckle and pants fly.

I knock on the door across from mine. "Who is that?" comes a throaty shout from within.

"*C'est moi, madame. Pardonez moi*, perhaps your girls would like these fresh *shwarmas* from Felfelah. The girls look so energetic, perhaps they are hungry."

The door opens quickly. A thin white hand sticks out, and my white plastic bag is taken in. I return to my room, start a shower, shave carefully without drawing blood. In the shower, I am singing slowly, gently, "When I was just a wee-wee tot, they put me on a wee-wee pot,



they left me on the wee-wee pot, to see if I'd wee-wee or not. Wee-wee, wee-..."

Loud banging on my suite door from the outside. Wrapped in a luxurious Egyptian white cotton towel large enough to cover nearly all of me, I open the door cautiously. She greets me with a wide-French smile, pecks me on both cheeks as I fumble to protect my Johnson. She smells like cloves and honey. She presses both my hands as her two maids push me aside to enter my suite. "*Merci monsieur*, you are so kind to my girls. I surely love you already. You saved us as we are all famished," she singsongs in English-sounding-like French tunes.

In a moment, they are all gone. I turn to look around the suite. Her slaves graced my well-made bed with several plastic bags with Arabic script. Picking through them casually, one has at least a kilo of roasted almonds, another tin of honey, another full of small oranges, and one with a colorful perfume jar with a French label.

I am overwhelmed by her generosity, and dress carefully, already dry in the dry Cairo summer air. Applying deodorant and checking my shaved face, I look in the large door mirror.

I knock on her door, “*Oui?*” I hear her throaty voice. “Would *madame* care to take a journey in Cairo tonight? My native driver knows the city and it would be safe, maybe fun as well.”

Ahmed brings the SUV to the front of the Semiramis. We board, first the lady, then the two girls, the two slaves, and finally, *moi*. I am ginning ear-to-ear, as Ahmed shakes his head at me. The lady doesn’t notice. She is happy to leave the hotel for a drive about town. “What would the charming *madame* wish to see?”

“The charming *madame* must go to Cairo’s best mall. She is dying to shop,” she says. Ahmed drives us to a spectacular mall along *El Corniche* by the *Riv Nil*.

The lady charges ahead, first to a toy store where she buys large, colorful plastic toys for the two boys back in Oman and almost an afterthought and at my suggestion, for the two girls with us and under the watchful eyes of their maids. She pays with a credit card. The two maids struggle to keep up as she leads us to a lady’s boutique. She grabs several skimpy silk gowns and rushes in to a dressing booth covered with a bright blue silk curtain.

I slip out of the nice shop to peruse overpriced books in the shop adjacent. After 15 minutes or so, I re-enter the boutique. Ahmed stands at the door, "You can't go in. It's ladies only." As we chat, the older girl comes forward and says, "It's okay, Ahmed. He's our Cairo dad," turning to the older maid, "right, nanna?"

Giggling, the older girl skips over to the green silk curtain to the dressing room and pulls back the curtain, revealing the now nearly naked French Rose of Oman. My eyes are stuck on the black hairy patch... She says, "*Non, non, non*, not here, not now," scolding the youngster, wagging a French finger, her full white breast bouncing gently. I notice Rose does not replace the curtain. From my gaze, she looks down at the black downy fur between her legs, spreading them slightly and laughs loudly.

We are now in the SUV, crowded with large plastic bags of toys and dresses. At least two or three dresses she bought were marked over \$3,000 each. She used her credit card, no bargaining. She says, "My husband who keeps the boys in Oman can well afford it."

Rose tells me she is a model, an entertainer and hostess, as Ahmed speeds us through the pleasant summer Cairo night. In the Cairo summer when is a sweltering dry 90+ degrees F, the hotel chatter is

“The Arabs are coming, The Arabs are coming,” meaning the wealthy Gulf Arabs are coming to Cairo to escape the 105+ degree F summer to shop, perhaps buy another wife, then on to their villas in Alexandria or even cooler Beirut on the Mediterranean. Rose tells me her husband is an emir with villas in Alex, but she prefers the south of France while he doesn’t allow her to go topless in public.

“Ah, I knew you were a model, an entertainer, when I fell in love with at the elevator tower,” I tell her. She laughs, and takes my hand in hers and squeezes, “Let me prove it. Girls, let’s sing fro your Cairo father...”

*“Cherie j’ai t’aime, cherie j’et adore, allahumma salli ‘alal Mustafa, ya Mustafa...,”* the three sing in unison, more or less, clapping and giggling, the oldest girl standing in the SUV, waiving a pointed finger provocatively towards my eyes, swaying her young hips.

“Mr. Skip, if I die now, do not tell my wife or sons, but I am ready to meet *Allah*,” says Ahmed.

We all laugh, except the two slaves, cramped together in the rear berth behind the seats in the totally full SUV.

*"Monsieur* Skip, would you mind very much if we make another stop tonight? I have something very important, how do you say, very personal, to achieve," Rose says softly.

"No problem, my charming French lady, your stopping will give me pleasure."

Rose laughs, takes my cell phone and discusses something in French. I do not understand a bloody word. "I need 90 minutes or so before he can see me. I should have called earlier to make the appointment, but it's your fault, *Monsieur*, as you surprised me and taken us all away from my thoughts, confusing my plans."

*"Mafish mushkaylah*, whatever pleases *madame*, pleases *moi*." She laughs loudly and has Ahmed drive us back to the same *hoi peloi* mall where she leaves me and Ahmed in the SUV with her two girls, the maids, her toys and dresses.

For the next two hours, the girls tell jokes in French, sing songs in French, dance in French, and giggle in French for Ahmed and me. It seems like only 15 minutes when the French lady from Oman returns to the SUV with a uniformed man carrying several plastic bags.

Ahmed leaves his diver's seat to rearrange resident bags and make space for incoming bags.

Rose says cheerfully, "Shoes, just shoes, but this one if for you," as she hands me a large box containing a lovely black silk suit. Rose says, "It's your size. I know the size of men," laughing.

*"Merci madame. Do you like riddles?"*

"Yes, I love them."

I ask her, "For the girls, this one, 'What do you call a witch that lives in the sand?'"

She translates to French. They look puzzled.

"A sandwich."

She translates again. She and the girls giggle.

"And for you, *madame*, 'What did the elephant say to the naked man?'"

Rose laughs, "I like that one. I really do. I've got a picture in my head of an elephant talking to a naked man. That in itself is very funny. But, *alors*, what does the elephant say? I don't know. *Dite moi*, please."

I tell her, "Very nice, but can it pick up peanuts?"

She bends forward. She holds her stomach, laughing, "That's charming, too funny, too, how does one say? I am wetting my panties and we are already late I think for my doctor."

Ahmed is flushed, embarrassed that we are speaking so bluntly. He speeds off to an address she repeats to him several times in Arabic. We arrive in Maadi, a Cairo suburb the size of a modest American city. Rose runs into an ornate but modern office building, pecking me quickly on both cheeks though I am in the front seat and she must go through the open window to reach me from outside.

It is quite late now, the girls are restless, and the slaves are sleeping. Ahmed is impatient. I start humming, "When I first came to this land, I was not a wealthy man. So I got myself a farm, and I did what I could. I called my farm, break-my-arm. But the land was sweet and good, and I did what I could."

The two girls are now singing along. I go through verse after verse several times, and finally the girls sing all of it though by themselves, proudly. They are very cheerie and full of energy. Ahmed is bored. Suddenly, in a repeated verse that goes “and I call my wife, run-for-your-life...” the SUV door slides open.

There she stands all smiles. “He gave me some pills, my gynecologist, for this infection.” God, how soon a man loses interest in a woman. I think, “A woman seeks a man for everything. A man seeks every woman for one thing.”

Back at the *fundouk*, I am carrying the 12-year old, the younger maid has the 8-year old in her arms, uniformed men are carrying her packages and my new black silk suit up to our respective suites. Rose gives me pecks on my cheeks. “*Au revoir, madame*,” I say. She says, “*Non, je revien.*”

I am sleeping without clothes. She is in the hall, at the door. “Please, let me in, my daughter’s Cairo father.” I open the door. We shower, wash and kiss each other to sleep in the king-size bed. I’m sure we are being observed by hotel staff. What the hell, I think. She sleeps



folded in my arms, awakes a moment, kisses me to sleep again as to tuck me into her French soul.

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A few days later, she knocks on the door. "*C'est moi, mon cher*, please let me in." She's in. We kiss passionately, her heels are off the floor, and we are knees-to-knees.

"I am so sad today. We must check out and travel to Alex for the rest of the summer. And must argue with the Semiramis over the hotel bill – they charge me so much for the small suite because of the extra beds for my maids."

"*Madame*, if you require money, please allow..."

"Oh, *non*, the money I have. It's my principles. I go now to argue, so said I must go to Alex. Perhaps you can join me only for the weekend, *puit etre?*"

"Perhaps, *madame*. Today is Friday, and I am free. Would you like me to entertain the girls? I could take them to the museum, or aquarium fish garden in Zamalek, or the zoo at Giza..."

"The zoo, please *monsieur* Skip, take them to the zoo. They have never been to a zoo. They will be so exciting to see live animals. But you must take their maids as well to protect them. They are my slave-maids and would die to protect my property, my girls."

"*Oui, mais oui.* Ahmed and I will be pleased to give you pleasure by taking your girls and their maids to the Giza Zoo. It's lovely there, even in summer with its flowing water canals, ponds, cascades, shade trees, and..."

"*Tres bien,* Yes, yes, of course, take them. I'll prepare them. You speak so lovingly to me, *mon cher.* You are my only friend in all of Egypt, the Cairo father of my girls."

"Of course, and I should say, if you permit, dear heart, say 'excited' not 'exciting,' if you please. Your girls will be excited. You are exciting, my love."

"*Oui,* I please, now let me go to prepare my girls and their slaves. You know, I bought them together in Yemen. They are mother and daughter and have been the maids of my daughters since their births."

I call Ahmed on my mobile, and within an hour, we six are inside the black tall-iron gates of the Giza Zoo, with courtesy plans or zoo maps, refreshed by the evaporating and flowing waters. I ask the girls, "What would you like to see, my French daughter?"

They giggle. "Giraffes, no bears, no lions, no everything. We want to see everything," says the older girl.

"*Mes chers enfants,*" I say, "do you know how to read a map? A map can help us find our way to see the things you want to see."

"*Non, mon pere de Cairo,*" says Merced, the older of the two girls.

"No one has shown us how to read maps. Mama tells us that we are just girls and it would be stupid to teach us such things."

It is a sad thing that such little is given to girls in the Gulf States.

"Well, let's see if we can lay this map on that table and figure out first where we are, then what you would like to see."

We lay the map on a concrete table in the full sun in front of a shaded tree. A family of several women is sitting on ornate weaved rugs

placed over the grass beneath a patch of shade trees behind us. The women have many children with them on this Friday afternoon. The girls are close to the women, sitting quietly and stiffly, or across from each other whispering. The boys are running back and forth on the broad asphalt paths, kicking a soccer ball, cheering loudly in Arabic and applauding each other.

The women are dressed in black full *galabeyas*, which show nothing but foreheads and partial faces, laugh and dish our food from large metallic pots. The children are dressed as Western kids anywhere. We can hear an afternoon call for prayer, remotely chanting, calling the faithful. The family ignores the call, as do we, as there are no religious police here as there is in the Gulf. We are all thankful that it is not Ramadan and that we can eat, drink, smoke, and so on in public during daylight without showing any disrespect at least or being detained and punished at worst.

“Oh, this is boring me so much,” says Livan, the younger girl. “Why can’t we just run to the animals without this map?”

“Look, I can understand how you might feel that way. But let me ask you, where does the Lone Ranger take his money? Can you answer that, Livan?”

The girls talk back and forth in French. Merced says, “We do not know where the Lone Ranger takes his money. And I personally think it is silly to ask.”

“Okay, listen carefully, as I’ll say this only once. The Lone Ranger takes his money to... to the bank, to the bank, to the bank, bank, bank...”

They laugh.

In Islam in the Gulf, only the boys matter. Boys are fed first. If there is food left, then the girls are fed. Boys are named at birth. Girls wait a year or so for their names. Boys never get traded. Girls are traded as payment for small and otherwise capital crimes. Boys are not mutilated. Girls routinely have their clitoris and sometimes inner vaginal lips cut out. Often, mothers and other female relatives, not surgeons, perform this non-Islamic genital mutilation, leading not only to shame and humiliation, but also sometimes to infection and disease. Sometimes, their vaginas are sewn up until the girls are married. The charming and insightful Somalian Ms Ayaan says these practices have been performed on 140 million women and girls. An

Egyptian magazine estimates that over 80 percent of Egyptian women and girls are so mutilated.

Boys are rarely punished for domestic crimes. Girls are beaten, sometimes killed by their male relatives, even by their incestuous rapists, for flirting, driving, showing disrespect, smoking, wearing make-up, dressing immodestly, and for sure for exposing themselves, having sex, and getting pregnant before marriage. Their male relatives usually kill adulterous women.

Fatima, my office manager in Cairo, tells me she beaten by several husbands for whom she could not bear children. Divorced several times for this failure, she lives with a sister and her family, in shame and guilt. Fatima gives generously to the poor at great personal sacrifice, and saves all year and borrows to make the *hajj* to seek purification, longing to be complete like Abraham's Sara. She believes like many childless Moslem women that *Allah* is angry with her for her sins and thus denies her completeness by denying her children. Some call such practices *gender apartheid*.

Even outside the Gulf, Moslem men routinely divorce wives who do not bear children, and take another wife if the born children are only girls.

Their two slaves are standing anxiously as we are leaning over the map.

“Tell us another one, our silly father in Cairo, please,” pleads Merced.

“Okay, now you should get this one as you both speak such good French. In America, we have several states. Fifty or so, I think. Several states have cities with French names like Baton Rouge, Louisville, and so on. One state is called Kentucky. Now here is the riddle, how do you pronounce the capitol of Kentucky, Louey-ville or Lewis-ville?”

They confer in French, and then Merced says, “That is no riddle. The answer is clearly Louey-ville.”

“Aha, *non mes enfants*, the capital of Kentucky is not Louisville, but Frankfort.”

They are now laughing almost uncontrollably. “That is very silly, very very *tres* silly,” says Merced.

“The point of my riddle about the Lone Ranger is that to take his money to the bank, he needs to know where the bank is located, so he needs to know how to read maps. So you need to know how to read maps so you can find the giraffes, *n’est pas?*”

“*Oui,*” says Merced, “*Allors.*”

After arranging the map to everyone’s satisfaction so that be see from it what is behind us, in front of us, to the left and right of us, and where we are crouching as well, we notice where the animals of there interest allegedly reside.

“Oh, look Levon, there are bears over there, and seals, see there are seals there, and here there is a fountain, and a camels, yes, let’s see the camels.”

“I don’t want to see camels. I want to see giraffes and bears and seals, but not camels. We have camels at home. We have a house of camels at home,” says Levon.

So now we are walking the trail Merced drew with her right index finger over the map from the concrete table in the open sun. She is carrying the map with full confidence as we horridly pass open gated

areas of one-horned striped horse-like animals, then zebras and their babies, camels, when suddenly, “We are lost,” says Merced. “The giraffes should be here now.” The girls argue quickly in French, the two slaves standing behind them, waiving their hands to get their attention.

Merced says, “We agree that the map is old and wrong and is wasting our... What is it?” she says harshly to one of the slaves. They talk rapidly in Arabic, then Merced spins around, pointing 30 degrees to her right saying, “Silly me, I have taken you the wrong way from the map, you see how stupid I am, I can’t even read a map and my stupid maid found the camels with her unwashed eyes over there,” and begins to cry.

“No, no, Merced, you are not stupid. Learning takes failure then re-learning and back and forth. It just doesn’t just happen. Smart people keep learning even when they make mistakes and fail. They just keep working at it, and then, all of a sudden it’s done and they have learned so much, more than they ever knew they could learn. Look, you two girls are so smart. Just look at all you know now.”

Merced is shaking, crying still, “Mama is right, we are so stupid, even my stupid maids know more than we do.”

“Listen to me girls, you are smart and strong and brave. You speak and understand several languages already. That’s French, and Arabic and even the more difficult English. You know songs and dance, you know about the ways of the household and shopping centers, how to dress and wash, how to get what you want from your parents and others, how to..”

“Yes, it is true we know these things,” spurts Merced, the crying seems to stop somewhat as her maid is holding her firmly yet gently now.

So we walk to the giraffes which were found by the maid not the map-readers, and admire their smooth skin, alternating soothing patches of white and tan and brown, and of course their great height as they loom over us at the tall wide, black iron gates that separate us from them. A shabby dressed uniformed man stands in front of the gate. Onlookers are taking bits of fruit from him in exchange from worn, crumbled bills, smaller than an Egyptian pound. Piasters I think. The people crowd around and press the man as he hardly keeps up with their demand. They are raising the fruit above their heads as far as they can reach up, while the two giraffes lean over the tall fence to swallow up the offerings. It’s a delight scene of mingled food-supply

by the giraffe-man, cash-demand by participatory onlookers, cash-incentives for the giraffe-man, giraffe-feeding incentives for the onlookers, and giraffe satisfaction otherwise gone to boring days in their gated open space. Ah, were Milton Friedman only here, the champion of incentives and free markets. Ah, markets and democracy in action.

“Would you like to feed the giraffes?” I ask the girls.

“Oh yes, we surely would but our mother would never allow it because they are filthy and our maids would fear we might be hurt and they would be punished, even killed if we were hurt bad, and... but oh, yes we would love to feed these tall dirty wild animals. Do you think we may?”

I am jowl to jowl with the giraffe-man, and I give him a full pound. For a pound, he gives me several fruit. I hand the fruit to the anxious and excited girls. They rush to push the other children aside, their maids running after them. It is a dam being broken by a human sea of the two small adolescent girls and their very large black-*galabeya'd* slaves, as the dam of other children and maids or parents opens and Merced and Levon station themselves beneath the two giraffes.

Merced is cheerfully feeding her giraffe, first with one hand, then another. Levon as well. Levon shoots something rapidly in French to Merced. Merced nods and laughs, placing a piece of smashed banana on her parted, straight black hair. Her giraffe leans even more forward and runs his nearly 2-foot long tongue over her head for the banana mash. A maid yells out, "*yalla, yalla,*" lunging forward to attempt to pull Merced away from the leaning giraffe with the extended swaying massive wild-animal tongue. But she can't get through because of the tight crowd around the two girls. Merced and Levon are delighted with the results. They are training the giraffe to massage their heads now in search of mashed bananas. Everyone starts talking at once in Arabic at this marvel.

After 8 or 10 minutes of this excited feeding, training, and top-head massage frenzy, the girls use up their fruit and skip off away from the crowd, looking at the map, re-aligning it to see if they can find where the bears and seals live.

We then moved away from the giraffes as we used up our mashed food. The girls want to get on to visit bears and seals. The bears were well-behaved and toy-like with real thick fur, sharp teeth and wet tongues, having been trained by many hands. The seals were smooth, wet, sloppy, and comically slipping on and off their posts to

everyone's delight. We fed the bears and seals as well. My heart was in my throat at the bears as I feared their claws, yet they were well-behaved, even as the two slaves wailed and rung their hangs.

Lavon heard a commotion from elsewhere. Merced checked the map and said it was probably a run on elephant visitors. She was right.

"Look, it is as my map told me. Just look at those silly, grand elephants. I had no thought that they would be so large and, and, how do you say, 'noble.'"

The elephants were delightful, though again, the two watchful and protective slaves of Merced and Lavon were horrified by the willingness of the girls to touch the wild beasts and allow the same to themselves. The girls were in a heavenly abandoned joy, now bargaining with me to provide for *baqsheesh* to the animal guards so they would get more food and play more with the elephants, filling their open trunks with smashed chunks of fresh fruits and vegetables.

In a too short time, the older made exchanged in Arabic with Merced, who informed me that we must return to the *fundouk* else they would be punished by Rose for being gone too long. I called Ahmed by mobile phone and we began a slow ramble back to the front high

black iron gate to the Cairo Zoo. We passed several gated, large open areas of horse-like animals, with and without horns, playing pleasantly on partially grassed soil yard. We passed many young boys playing with soccer and other balls, and several large families of women and girls on mats beneath grassed, shade-tree areas.

We saw dozens, probably scores, of wild cats that live on the zoo grounds, playfully stalking small fish. The small fish escape from the wooden slotted boxes of live fish feed as workers throw the boxes from the back of trucks to the asphalt road, unloading them quickly, nonchalantly, and without any interest. With each throw, the open spaces between the slots open wider, small fish slip out, and waiting cats jump forward for a fish-reward. Merced and Lavon start to laugh, as their slaves shake their heads and point fingers warningly at the girls.

The girls' laughter attracts the ball-playing boys, who now are aware of the bold cats as they mine fresh small fish from the unloading pickup truck. Shouting in Arabic, the boys run to the partially open fresh fish crates, and, slipping in unnoticed by the workmen, pull the slots open more so, allowing more and large fresh fish to escape to the willing claws of the waiting cats.

The girls are delighted and engage the boys in Arabic. The slaves are shouting in Arabic as well, as the boys respond in Arabic. Finally, the slaves herd the girls away, who shout even louder to the boys growing smaller and smaller as the slaves move us closer to the fountain by the front gate. At the fountain, Lavon exchanges with Merced who says, "*Mon pere de Cairo*, wouldn't it be nice to have an ice cream before we live this fountain?"

I approach the vendor as the slaves engage in conversation. "*Mes enfants, s'il vous plait*, please pick what you like, and ask your maid as well." They are delighted to do so, some picking bars others cups or cones. Levon absentmindedly drops her small wooden spoon and one of the maids shout at her. I ask the vendor for another spoon so Levon can eat her cup. He gives me a spoon, which I give to Levon, while the younger maid shouts at her, waiving a harsh finger in the Levon's ice-cream wanton face.

The girls eat their ice cream casually, chatting to each other in French. Merced is licking her chocolate covered vanilla bar, while Levon digs out small bits of vanilla from her small cup, being extremely careful not to spill or drop anything. Suddenly, the boys we met who liberated the fish for the cats surround us. The boys chat with my two girls in Arabic. The two slaves are torn between chasing

them away and horridly eating their ice cream cones from under the black cloths covering their mouths. The ice cream wins out and the slaves now ignore the girls and surrounding boys.

“Merced, do you think we should treat these heroic boys to an ice-cream reward for feeding those cats?”

“*Oui, oui, monsieur.* Please make it so. They were so kind to the hungry cats. To be fare, we should be kind to them. And they are so handsome and amusing too.”

Merced says something to the boys and the vendor; hold her hand out to me to which I offer a wad of Egyptian Pounds. She carefully selects a few notes and gives them to the appreciative vendor. We are all content until several large, conservatively dressed women are upon us, shouting in Arabic. Merced responds to them and they smile and giggle.

Merced turns to me, saying, “*Ma’fish mushkalah*, their moms wanted to assure that the ice cream is *hallah*, which it is as it is clearly marked in Arabic, so there is no problem with, with, how would you say?”

"The religious purity," I offer.

"*Oui, mon pere*, with the Islamic laws of religious purity, *oui*. And so it is."

I think of when I was 17 years and enrolled in the marines at a recruiter's booth on Fordham Road in the Bronx, New York. As I was underage, the marine recruiter called my mother to get her permission, which she animatedly denied on the phone as I overheard. "What, he will be *milkhutz* while you will be *fleishutz*, and he will be *fleishutz* while you will be *milkhutz*. It would be ridiculous and never work out," she said, slamming down the phone to a no doubt flustered marine with no idea of the fine points of *kashrut* or Jewish dietary laws.

The boys leave the happy vendor and us. He closes down his cart. The sun is setting. The boys walk away with their moms. We walk through the front gate to the street. Ahmed is waiting impatiently in front of the red SUV as we enter and speed off to the Semiramis. I realize that I have kept Ahmed too long and slip him some pounds, "*Shukran* for your patience, my brother, I know you must be anxious to see you wife and sons tonight."

“Not them so much as my maid’s cooking, Mr. Skip, and I need a bath as well.”

I smell blood and look straight into Ahmed’s face.

“What happened to you, Ahmed? Were you in an accident while we were in the zoo?”

“No, Mr. Skip, I was indiscrete with the police and they beat me.”

“What? What happened? Was it a parking problem?”

“Oh no, Mr. Skip. Remember the other day when you called me to take this family to drive around Cairo at night?”

“Yes, yes, go on, Ahmed.”

“Well, I arrived at the hotel turn around early and the police became suspicious of me. They checked my papers and found that this leased SUV did not have its proper importation papers from Alex. They took my driver’s license and issued me a warning to resolve the paper work in two weeks.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, it’s been nearly ten days, and I forgot about it. But when I dropped you off at the zoo, I remembered. I drove to the police station and explained the situation. They told me I would have to drive to Alex to get the papers. I foolishly offered them *baqsheesh*, which they took and beat me anyhow. Then they told me I must go to Alex to straighten the paper work. Mr. Skip, I need to drive to Alex tomorrow.”

“*Mon pere* de Cairo, we are soooooo bored. Would you tell amuse us?” asks Merced.

“Sure, *mes enfants*. Have you heard the story about the donkey, the dog, and the goat that takes a bus ride?”

“*Non, non, mon pere, dites, dites...*”

“Well, many years ago, in French-speaking Africa, a donkey, a dog, and a goat take a bus ride in a village.”

“Oh, how silly, *monsieur*, how silly.”

“Now listen carefully. The donkey has the full fare, pays it, and walks through the bus to take a seat. The dog has a big bill, which the driver cannot change. The driver says, ‘I do not have change for such a bill now, but if you take a seat, perhaps I will have change when you leave the bus.’”

“Oh, that is so silly, this story, mon pere.”

“You must hear it all so it will make sense, okay?”

“*Oui, qui*, we will listen to it all,” says Merced, translating to French for Levon.

“Then the dog gives the pill to the driver and takes a seat on the bus. Now a goat enters the bus with some coins. The goat says, ‘I do not have enough for this ride, but I must take this bus.’ The driver says, ‘okay, please take a seat, and perhaps you will make some friends and by the time you leave you will have enough to pay in full.’”

Merced says, “This is too long a story. Will it end soon?”

“Yes, nearly there now. After a while, the donkey, the dog, and the goat leave the bus. And even to this day, when a bus encounters a

donkey on the road, the donkey doesn't move as it remembers his ancestor paid in full. And when a bus encounters a dog, the dog chases the bus because it remembers his ancestor owes him money for overpayment. And surely, you have seen this yourself, *mes jounes fils*. Even now, when a bus encounters a goat, the goat runs away because it remembers his ancestor still owes the driver."

Laughing, Merced translates to Levon, who is laughing as well. The two slaves remain wooden and puzzled, ever watching and protecting their two young girls.

Arriving at the *fundouk*, Ahmed drops us off after security inspection. We enter the luxurious lobby with its polished red granite walls and white marble floor. We are an odd entourage of two giggle energetic French-Omani girls dressed from fancy malls, two serious Yemenite slaves wrapped head-to-toe in black *galabeyas*, and one tired American dressed as a casual American.

Lavon shouts in French, "*Ma mere, ma mere*," as they girls run to her mother at the registration desk. The two slaves flowing rapidly as I drag slowly behind.

"Ma mere, ma mere, nous..."

“Please, do not interrupt me, you stupid girls. Don’t you see I am meeting at the desk with this clerk? How rude can you both be, embarrassing me so in public? How thoughtless...”

“Rose, your girls are happy to see you after a long day with a stranger at the zoo,” I say.

“Yes,” she turns to me with a wide French smile, pecking me on the cheeks with as sharp, gentle shoulder-squeeze. I feel the hardness between my legs. But don’t move back as she moves forward, chuckles and tells me, “Ah, so you are ready for me, my Cairene American lover, even here in the public lobby. Soon enough, I will join you again in your suite.”

Merced speaks excitedly to Rose in French. Rose is puzzled and tells me, “Why would you teach them to read a map? Even I do not read maps. They are simply stupid girls. They will become stupid women. There is no need for them to know anything as stupid women. It is stupid to teach them anything. But I love you for being so kind to them, and ice cream as well for them, their slaves, and strange boys. How odd you are, my foreign lover.”

“Rose, why would you cheat them of what they could be? What the world can benefit from them? They are bright, enthusiastic, seeking young girls. You can help them become anything they would want to be.”

“*Non, non, ne dites moi pas* such, such foolishness. You do not understand anything. Do you think you are in Europe or America? We are in Egypt from Oman. We are in the land of the Moslems, you sweet fool of a lover!”

“Oh Rose, with so little, they can be so much...”

“You do not know anything about what these stupid girls can be. They already have been promised to marriage to wealthy men to help my powerful emir become even more powerful a tyrant. There is just no point in making them more than stupid girls, don’t you see, *mon amor?*”

“What? Already promised in marriage? By *Allah*, Merced is barely 12, Levon 8!”

“Yes, by *Allah*, that is the promise. That is there fate. And I should alert you, my, my cocky American lover, that I myself saved your life today. I did.”

“Say, what? What are you talking about?”

“You are not to worry, but I warn you to be alert. My powerful husband knows about us. The hotel sent him films of us in your suite...”

“What, how? Why would the?”

“Listen, my husband is an owner of *le fundouk*, and of course...”

“You knew this in advance?”

“Yes, of course, it is always this way. But you are safe, as I chose you over others this summer. He had my Arabic lover killed here in Cairo last summer, so I decided to pick a European or better an American. And when I met you, I knew from your sloppy dress and awful French that you were American or Canadian, and that my powerful husband would not dare kill you, though he might have you beaten or detained to frighten you.”

Rose sees my whitened face, here in the public lobby, "Perhaps you should go to your room and lie down. I'll be up shortly and attend you, you can be sure." She hugs me, squeezes my shoulders, and pecks me on both cheeks.

Speaking rapidly in Arabic, Rose commands her two slaves I presume to take the two girls to the Spice Lounge on the same floor but up short ornamental steps.

In the lobby, Rose pulls me to an alcove behind the pink granite registration desk. She firmly grinds her soft groin into my hardness. She squeezes my left buttock with her dainty right hand. She gives me a promising wink and a "*mom amor*."

From the lobby, I slip in to the Spice Café. It is a large, well sun-lit hall. The girls and their maids are gone or I don't see them. I sit at a table, escorted by a broad-butt Egyptian woman in a Navy blue skirt and white blouse. I order roast lamb kebabs and Turkish coffee from a big-breasted, full-figured waitress in a white blouse and a blue tie and skirt, her breast struggling to break free of the tight blouse. She has a pleasant wide smile with full red lips and straight shinny black

hair pulled back in a tight bun. Some black hairs are sticking out of her ears and under her nose, quite alluring nonetheless.

Within a few minutes, she returns with her flared large nostrils and her wide hooked nose. I now see bleach stains on her cinnamon skin. She is a joyful camel with two large looming breasts. The right one is tagged "NOHA." She brings my meal comes with small plates of *chumas*, *babaganoush*, and *baklava*. As I nibble, breathing in the lamb, I overhear two Egyptians at the next table talking in Arabic. The lamb smells delicious. I dip a warm pita into the *chumas*, and pick up a marinated olive between my right thumb and pointer.

One Egyptian says, in English, "I am sorry I am late, but traffic from New Maadi is horrible, even on this Friday night. Finally, I rolled down my window to ask a man darting from car-to-car what is going on.

"What did he say?"

'He was quite alarmed. He told me that the Moslem Brotherhood kidnapped our beloved President Mubarak and the terrorists were asking \$100 million LE or they would douse the president in gasoline and set him on fire.'

‘Oh, that’s terrible. What happened next?’

‘I asked the man, ‘what is the average donation?’’

‘He told me, ‘About a liter.’’’

The two men laughed uncontrollably, one holding his stomach, the other with black coffee flowing from his nostrils.

I paid my bill in pounds, leaving a tip for Noha as large as the tab itself to reward the service and the visual pleasure she gave me so freely.

I spring happily to the elevator towers. I press the button “UP.” Wait. Three modestly dressed Moslem women approach the towers. My elevator opens. I step aside to allow the women to enter. I look away as the door closes and lifts them away as I remain in the lobby floor. I repress the UP button for the next elevator.

Shortly afterwards, Rose is in bed with me.

“Oh, what pleasure to see you, my Rose. How did you get in her, my love?”

“Ah, I will show you some pleasure now, my summer lover. I have a key card, of course, as I gave *baqsheesh* to the desk clerk. In Cairo, everything is possible. *Maintenant, fermer vos yeux et me permet d’embrasser.*”

In my bed, I reach between her smooth legs to her thighs, finding a smooth wet crevice.

“*Q’est ce c’est? Por moi?*”

“*Non*, my Arab husband like me shaved there. He is to join me in Alex tomorrow. I had it done in the hotel’s woman salon, *El Siddiqui Womb*, on the second floor next to the *Top 2 Bottom Intimate Apparel*. Do you not think it charming, *mon amor*?”

“Yes, of course it is charming. You can have Ahmed drive you to Alex tomorrow, if you think it would be safe for him.”

Standing over me, her legs apart, I look up to paradise. She says, “Do you think Ahmed is not safe with me? Oh, I see, you think he may not

be safe from my husband. Not to worry, my love. Your driver will be safe with me.”

“*Quelle bizarre*, I had no idea such things as full Brazilians happen in this hotel.”

“‘Full Brazilians,’ that is where you have been shaved beneath, front and back like so,” I said waiving at her charms.

“Oh, it was very funny today at the *Le Womb*. While you were at the zoo with my girls, I had it done. Another guest rushed in while I was quite spread out in the shaving room. She was another French woman married to another Gulf Arab like me. She was talking on her mobile to him in common Arabic. She told him he would have it shaved for tomorrow, also in Alex to meet him from Bahrain, *je pense*. She had no appointment, and said to him, I should not tell you, that she was dirty and menstruating, I thought so he would leave her along, but then she said she was in need of a clean...”

“*Bon, c’est bon*. That is enough. Now bring it closer to my lips, *mon amor*.”

"Mais oui, mon cher, mon amor. I forgive you, your thoughts. J'ai des pensées pareilles aussi."

"The petal of the rose that was that stung, Le pétale de la rose qui était que piquée," I think to myself.

I recall a poem by Frost, *To Earthward*.

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things,
The flow of - was it musk
From hidden grapevine springs
Down hill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough

To all my length.

- Robert Frost